

Antiwar Veterans Broaden Perspective

By Paul W. Valentine
Washington Post Staff Writer

Kick Nixon out.

Ruling class is gonna pour.

Workers' muscles are gonna flex.

Bourgeoisie, you are next.

These four lines of doggerel, pasted on a wall in the downtown office of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization, reflect a basic transformation the VVAW/WSO has undergone since it was here to demonstrate against the government three years ago.

In April, 1971, the veterans camped on the Mall as a tightly knit ad hoc group with a single unadorned demand—end the war.

Two weeks ago, the organization, its membership now broadened to include non-veterans, returned to the Mall with an assortment of five demands embroidered with a great deal of flashy Marxist rhetoric and a public analysis linking U.S. economic woes to class repression at home and the strife in Indochina to U.S. imperialism abroad.

Their four days of rallies and marches ended, several VVAW/WSO leaders reviewed the events with a reporter and concluded that they had achieved their goal—increased public awareness of what they feel is a causal relation between veterans' specific problems and general U.S. political and economic repression.

"In 1971," said Chip Berlet, 24, press coordinator for

VVAW/WSO, "we came to deal with the symptom—the war. In 1974, we are dealing with the entire disease."

Berlet and other organizers acknowledge the broadened political base of their protest with its attendant cacophony of Marxist shibboleths and partisan cries for insurgent guerrilla forces throughout Indochina.

"But you don't have to be a Marxist to be anti-imperialist," said Terry Selzer, 26, an ex-Marine who is Maryland-Virginia-D.C. coordinator for VVAW/WSO.

"We are a mass organization," he said, with a loose membership of more than 25,000. "We have Marxists-Leninists, Democrats, Republicans, pacifists, anarchists. We are united as anti-imperialist."

Throughout last week's demonstrations, especially the final Fourth of July rally attended by 2,000 to 5,000 protesters on the Ellipse, revolutionary slogans and chants were heavy in the air as the crowds cheered:

"Seize the times, organize . . . Down with American imperialism . . . Victory to the Vietnamese . . . Vietnam, Wounded Knee, all the people must be free."

Such slogans were commonly heard among groups attending the mass antiwar rallies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the VVAW of that time maintained a narrow and virtually single-minded cry—end the war.

With that war now offi-

cially ended, the veterans and their supporters are making new demands on five broad fronts: end U.S. aid to South Vietnam and Cambodia and require fuller U.S. compliance with the Paris Accords, remove President Nixon from office, grant unconditional and universal amnesty to all draft evaders and military deserters, abolish the four present less-than-honorable military discharge categories and improve GI financial benefits.

Organizers say they succeeded in penetrating public awareness of these issues during their most recent demonstrations despite police efforts to prevent it.

Citing several police-demonstrator clashes that occurred during the week, Berlet said, "They were trying to provoke a situation. . . They were trying to obscure our purpose with a lot of headlines about police action, but they failed."

"The police strategy," said Jean Friedman, 33, California-Nevada coordinator for VVAW/WSO, "was first to either stop or diminish the demonstrations, or failing that, to make police confrontation an issue and thereby overshadow our purpose."

The VVAW/WSO had originally asked to camp on the Mall at the foot of the Capitol as a 24-hour-a-day symbolic and political gesture, but was denied permission by the Interior Department and defeated in a court attempt to reverse the decision.

Demonstrators were given

limited permission to remain on the Mall around the clock but, in accordance with park regulations, were not permitted to sleep or camp.

For many of the 300 to 400 veterans and supporters on the Mall, the four-day action became an endurance test in which they attempted to stay awake all night in such small numbers and for such short periods that police observers would not intervene.

As it was, US Park Police ordered the entire group out at 3:30 a.m. July 3 after scores of exhausted protesters fell asleep. The group returned later in the day, however, clashing briefly with police on at least two occasions. Some 20 demonstrators and several policemen were injured.

The demonstrations lacked the drama and immediacy of the VVAW action here in April, 1971, at the peak of the turbulent antiwar movement.

At that time, hundreds of veterans, some crippled and in wheelchairs, came in the ragged remains of their uniforms, camped in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling against them as police looked on, marched through ranks and in a final gesture of repudiation threw their war medals on the Capitol steps.

Their duty campsite on the Mall attracted an international press, and several congressmen and senators visited the site. There was

the atmosphere of a military outpost as the veterans pitched olive drab tents and conversed in battlefield lingo.

Last week, in contrast, there were few outward signs that many of the protesters were former servicemen. Blue jeans and T-shirts were far more common than battle fatigues.

More women and children were present. The organization recently broadened its membership to allow persons other than veterans, and this was reflected in the crowd. Although there were many old hands who had been at the VVAW encampment in 1971, there was also a wide assortment of younger veterans, draft evaders and other civilian war resisters.

With the street demonstrations now ended, leaders say they are returning to their regions to push their five demands by holding forums and talks, counseling individuals on amnesty and military discharge matters and continuing a general "education" program.

"We came here to demonstrate on the five demands," national VVAW coordinator Eddie Damato said, "We did that. Now we're going back to our communities."

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By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

Veterans against the war gather at F Street headquarters. From left, they are Eddie Damato, Jean Friedman, Terry Selzer and Chip Berlet.